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George Partridge:

Teacher, Soldier, Statesman

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

"Duxbury is a sleepy, snooty South Shore town, with a pleasant rural quality of life." So wrote a reporter of a Boston paper half a dozen years ago. I will not vouch for the accuracy of that quotation, but I will state firmly that I recall the editor of the Duxbury Clipper took up the cudgels against that reporter and his misuse of the word "snooty," reminding that gentleman (it surely could not have been the work of a lady) of the many who make their living in the town, and the basic democracy of our local institutions including town meeting that places in the Warrant a full page of blank spaces for



Students at Partridge Academy, 1915

volunteer work to assist in the operation of the town's services. (I might add he should have been one of the 500 people who turned out to defend the clam-diggers' right of way to the mud flats on Powder Point when a town landing access was threatened this past fall.

I join the Clipper editor, but my protest is against the word "sleepy." On the contrary I find Duxbury full of surprises. Something is always happening to wake me up out of my retirement complacency, like the account in this past week's Clipper of Liz and Chuck Heidenreich's skiing prowess on European slopes. Especially Chuck's making medical history by proving that diabetes may not necessarily be the handicap in athletics that is has been believed to be hitherto. Our young people are always surprising us by their skills and the forthright way they are taking leadership in their various fields.

It surprised me to discover from Dr. Jack Hill, for example, that 70% of our young graduates go on to further educational institutions. Three of Duxbury's soccer players recently made the All-American team: Stephen Cass, Jackie and Jeff McAvoy. The Boston Globe reported that the drama group at DHS won the state's dramatic award 5 times in the past 10 years.

My greatest surprises come, however, from Duxbury's history. People ask me how I decide what to write about, and it is really simple: I read and read and look around all over town and talk to people and something really hits me -- like the child's story about the emperor who had no clothes on. Most of my writing is an answer to "Did you know so-and-so? Did you realize just what that meant?" Do you feel in your life in Duxbury today the effects of this or that person's life in town, or the town's decision to do a certain thing?

For example, we know the cable was laid by the Great Eastern steamship all the way from Brest, France to Duxbury. Why Duxbury? Was it the first clear sandy beach from Marblehead south (as Ladd MacMillan suggests)? Did you realize that feeling was still strong enough against England that the cable was landed only on French and American soil, to avoid repercussions in Canada in the event of hostilities with England, and this in 1869 no less?

Reading between the lines of town reports also furnishes startling revelations. I noticed that in one of

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these there were 2 fire chief reports, one from my father and one from Eben Briggs. I was out of town for 50 years of my life before I took my retirement here, so I had no information on this except that I did hear as I came home for a visit that Father had been in a big fracas at the fire department. So I asked the now retired Fire Chief Howard Blanchard about it. "Oh, yes, I remember there was some sort of political upheaval in town that year," he replied in understatement.

Another surprise came a few weeks ago when the president of the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, Bud Hutton, presented the executive board with a letter he had received from a similar society in Annapolis, Md. requesting the loan of the portrait of George Partridge, attributed to Rufus Hathaway (but now in question) and hung in the dining room of the King Caesar House. There is to be a celebration in that city of the 200th Anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolutionary War. The signing took place on Nov. 30, 1782 and the ratification by the Old Confederation on April 19, 1783. (I'm indebted to Dr. Henry Zabierek, curriculum director at DHS for this information.) Since George Partridge was a participant in these proceedings it was hoped that we could forward to them this portrait. (Through some mystery this request was not implemented.)

That same week I was reading Alison Arnold's column in the Clipper in which she gave a few broad facts about George Partridge, among them making the affirmation that he was felt to be "the most distinguished citizen in Duxbury history."

Having graduated from Partridge Academy and never giving any thought as to who our benefactor was, I was triggered into a search for facts, knowing that a gentleman with these credentials should have a wider acquaintance among townsfolk. Hence these words.

Who was George Partridge?

I remembered seeing a boulder with his name on it on the lawn in front of the town offices on Tremont St. Just what did it say? I drove over and wrote down the inscription: "George Partridge, 1740-1828, Teacher, Soldier, Statesman."

I next went to the Duxbury Free Library and the Duxbury room upstairs, but found very little material either by or about him. I now knew that he had been a part of the signing of the Treaty of Paris, but that was about all. Duxbury, I pondered, had been incorporated for over 140 years by the time of the Revolution.

I next went to our Duxbury historian, Dorothy Wentworth, who put me in touch with the C.F. Eatons of Washington St., descendants of the Partridges and now living in one of their houses. I am gratefully indebted to them for the information this essay embodies of the life of George Partridge and his contribution to Duxbury and American life.

The first Partridge to arrive in Duxbury was the Rev. Ralph Partridge, who came from England to be Duxbury's first pastor, fulfilling an incorporation requirement exacted of all New England towns in the

Massachusetts Bay Colony at that time (1637). This points up an incredible fact for modern Americans relishing the pleasures and vicissitudes of an almost totally secular society. It is hard for us to understand the early New England colonies for they were theocracies, i.e. living under the rule of God alone as interpreted by their clergy. What is more, the clergy pretty much ran things, for better or worse. Today with the first Sunday shopping day just passed, it is hard to move back in imagination to this climate of culture. So imbued with the conviction of God's will for their lives that they were not content to live and worship for themselves but made this a requirement of all under their jurisdiction.

For example, when King George II asked Massachusetts to take over the courts in the then pretty much wilderness of Maine, they discovered to their horror that villages and settlements were being built without churches or any other effort to hear the "Word of God," so they set up worship centers with the extra incentive of fines or imprisonment for failure to keep the Sabbath and instruct their young. Maine, despite this effort to Puritanize her, still retains much of the sense of relaxation and humanity and even humor that so frustrated the "eager beaver" lawmakers from colonial Massachusetts.

George Partridge was born on Feb. 8, 1740, the great grandson of Ralph Partridge, Duxbury's first pastor. Family records indicate that at 14 he was tutored by the local padre (a common way clergy had of supplementing their meager incomes), so that he could enter Harvard as he pointed his way into the Lord's ministry. It can be noted in passing that probably 90% of Harvard graduates took up pastorates throughout New England, for this was the founding purpose of Harvard College. George graduated in the class of 1762, but a throat ailment prevented his continuing on to ordination and he took up teaching in the nearby town of Kingston.

On his father's death, he inherited the vast tracts of land that the family had been amassing ever since Ralph had come here from England. At about this time he shifted his teaching location to Point School, an added attraction for the pupils being the ability to fish through the holes in the pine board floor at high tide. The school's location, if my hunch is correct, was just north of the junction of Powder Point Ave. and King Caesar Rd., where a 300th Anniversary granite slab marks the spot.

I, myself, attended "Point School," then a modest one-room structure on Cedar St., now the Parish House for Holy Family Church.

During these days, George's life must have been rather hectic for he had to maintain large acres of land with subsistence crops, and all the work of gathering firewood for the long winters and much of the time involved in managing town affairs as well. In an infant country it must have been a truly challenging time.

His horizons began to expand outside the town in his election as sheriff of Plymouth County, a post he retained for many years. A further expansion took place in 1773 when the selectmen of Duxbury received an urgent letter from the selectmen of the town of Boston. It seems some differences had cropped up in the relations between the colonies and the Mother Country. George was asked to be part of a committee to reply to the Boston letter, and this was the modest beginning of what was to be a great career in the service of his country. He was a born leader, and one appointment led to another involving him more and more deeply in political life. As military conflict was a possibility he was found drilling young men like himself on the Meeting House lawn, probably on the land now occupied by Harriet Marston. It is reported that these troops did really see action in a brief skirmish with British redcoats in Marshfield. No casualties were reported.

With the British surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, Partridge came into national prominence as a member of the Old Confederation, and then later, its successor, the Continental Congress. His involvements became national in scope but he still held onto his first love, namely teaching, and retained his post as sheriff of Plymouth County, as well as managing his relatively large Duxbury estates.

In his later years, he can be seen as assisting in the beginnings of Duxbury's shipbuilding industry and heroic Duxbury ship designers and sea captains sought his counsel. We can see him, too, with a stagecoach filled with outstanding Duxbury citizens attending the Bicentennial celebration of the Landing of the Pilgrims in 1820, where Professor William Ticknor of Harvard reported that Daniel Webster addressed the thousands of people (some of them veterans of Lexington and Concord, of Brandywine and Saratoga) and held them standing spellbound for 2 hours in one of the greatest patriotic speeches in American history. (I looked up this address in the library and found myself dozing over the 3rd page.)

Partridge House social gatherings were great town events with the younger Westons, the Frazars, the Drews and the Winsors frequent attenders. He was indeed the patriarch of the town, and hale and hearty until he died at the age of 88, having lived a life filled to the brim with achievements for his local community, the State and County and the nation itself.

After my research, I can't help agreeing with Alison Arnold that he was the most distinguished of Duxbury's citizens. And as the last lines of Tennyson's "Enoch Arden" say, "So passed the strong heroic soul away."

I conclude with a quote from an address by Harry

Bradley, speaking for the board of trustees of Partridge Academy on the occasion of the final transfer of the Academy to the town of Duxbury in 1925. "I believe that on this occasion and at every possible opportunity we should pay tribute to this man whose wisdom, foresight and regard for the boys and girls of Duxbury mark him as a man of outstanding character in his day and whose memory we as trustees try to preserve as we carry out to the best of our ability his known wishes and desires as expressed in his will: 'To provide in my native town for a higher degree of instruction in mathematics, geography, history and language and other branches of good learning than the common schools supply, but not to provide a substitute for such schools so important to be constantly maintained.' "

Bartlett Bradley, Duxbury veterans' officer and former town moderator, to whom I am indebted for the above quote, is also chairman of the Partridge Scholarship Committee, which each year dispenses endowment income to worthy DHS students going on to college. In this, the life intention of this great Duxbury citizen carries on for the present and future generations. I might add as well that this fund is open-ended, and hospitable to further gifts that can form a continuing tribute to George Partridge, "Teacher, Soldier, Statesman."
